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## Impact of Mother Tongue on Children's Learning Abilities in Early Childhood Classroom

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### Abstract

The study investigated the impact of a mother tongue on the learning abilities of pre-school children in one of the states in Nigeria, the nation of over 200 ethnic groups and more than 400 native languages. A quasi-experimental design was adopted. The results showed a significant difference in the post-test scores of the experimental and control groups. The study concluded that using a mother tongue in early childhood classroom was effective in fostering children's learning abilities.

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## 1. Introduction

Today, educators in countries across the globe face the same pressure to start exposing children to academic skills at a progressively younger age. This pressure is largely caused by the concerns about children not being ready for school as well as concerns about children falling behind in their later learning outcomes [1]. Educators who advocate such an approach to early childhood learning, strongly believe that the primary mission of preschool should be to support early academic learning and, therefore, the main concern of pre-school teachers is about the quality of learning outcomes in pupils. According to Osters et al. [2], learning outcomes describe what students are expected to demonstrate in terms of knowledge, skills and values at a given age upon completion of the whole programme or some of its parts. That is, after a learning episode, the learner should have acquired new skills, knowledge, and/or attitudes. These three areas were identified by Bloom [3] as three domains of educational activities:

Cognitive: mental skills (*Knowledge*). They involve knowledge and the development of intellectual skills. This includes the recall or recognition of specific facts, procedural patterns, and concepts that help to develop intellectual abilities and skills.

Affective: growth in feelings or emotional areas (*Attitude*). This domain includes the manner in which we deal with things emotionally, such as feelings, values, appreciation, enthusiasms, motivations, and attitudes.

Psychomotor: manual or physical skills (*Skills*). ), which include physical movement, coordination, and use of gross and fine motor-skills.

This taxonomy of learning behaviors can be thought of as learning abilities or as outcomes of learning. The learning process in a pre-school classroom is very unique because the teacher must be communicating with preschool children in developmentally appropriate ways. Thanks to this approach each child is encouraged to work at his or her level of comfort and pace. Also, it provides the environment that creates curious and active learners consistently engaged in activities and learning experiences in which they can feel successful. Knowing how to teach in developmentally appropriate ways means that a teacher should understand why it is important in early learning and what those ways are. One of the appropriate ways of teaching and learning in early childhood is the correctly selected medium of instruction and communication.

In the last few decades, research has demonstrated that the quantity and quality of the language of instruction has some influence on the learning abilities of pre-school children. Researchers hold different opinions whether the medium of instruction and communication in a preschool classroom should be mostly in the language of the immediate environment or in the official language of the country especially in case of multilingual nations [4].

Nigeria is a good example of a multilingual nation with its accompanying problems of language choice. As a West African nation with over 200 ethnic groups and more than 400 native languages, Nigeria is experiencing what is called linguistic plurality [5]. There are individuals who are bilingual or multilingual either in indigenous languages (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) or indigenous languages and the English language which is the official language of the country.

Linguistic plurality is reflected in many spheres of the life of Nigerian people. It influences Nigeria's educational system as well. The outcome of this is that more than one language is used both in the classroom and in the course of a child's education especially in the pre- and lower primary schools. As stated in the National Policy on Education [6] the medium of instruction during the pre-primary school stage shall be the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment. At the primary school level, the medium of instruction shall be the language of the immediate environment for the first three years while English shall be taught as a school subject.

Mother tongue is the first language that a person learned. It is generally accepted that in teaching and learning processes, the child's mother tongue is of utmost importance. For one thing, it categorizes a large part of the child's environment, that is, it has names for most of the objects, actions, ideas, attributes and so on that are so important to him [7]. This no doubt will go a long way to foster proper and adequate communication between teachers and pupils, and further promote learning as the child feels more comfortable to express himself in a language he/she understands and can identify with.

As many school practitioners in different parts of the world advocate the use of the mother tongue as a medium of communication and instructions in early years of learning, there are several studies pointing out that it is still unclear whether schooling in children's native language is an effective approach to improving their learning abilities [8].

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